



## AFRICAN TRADITIONS AND THE MODERN HEALTHCARE DELIVERY SYSTEM IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Some existing literature on healthcare were of the opinion that living in good health is the desire of everybody. Consequent upon this, the various ethnic groups in Nigeria have traditional means of handling their health challenges. However, since the arrival of orthodox medicine that accompanied Christianity to Nigeria, traditional healthcare has been facing existential challenges. This study sets to examine the relevance of traditional healthcare system to the health benefit of the contemporary Nigerian society. The study employs qualitative method of data collection and adopts historical and sociological approaches to analyse the data collected. Findings revealed that traditional healing is not against modern healthcare but supplementary to it as the World Health Organization approves its usage to cure illness. Also, studies in nursing science show that the tradition of the patients under the care of medical personnel must not be suppressed; more so as the traditional therapy is pushing forward in the global healthcare delivery system. The paper concludes that African tradition on healthcare system has sustained Nigerians over many generations. It therefore recommends that government at all levels should rally round traditional methods of healing so as to address the cases of sicknesses that are now defying orthodox medications.*

**KEYWORDS:** African Traditions, Healthcare Delivery, Orthodox, Healing, Medication, Contemporary, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

Traditions are beliefs, customs and the ways of doing things (Michael 2013). They are transmitted from one generation to the other. However, these traditions are subject to amendment and adjustment as they move from one generation to other. Each community and society have its set of traditions through which it addresses various existentialist challenges facing it among which is health challenge. Before the emergence of colonial masters in Africa, Nigerians have their ways of dealing with their health challenges through their traditional means. The importance attached to health among Nigerians generally is well known. To them, health is wealth and they can do many things to preserve it (Alana 2001). Generally, health is a 'state of wellbeing which an individual experiences in his person, be it physically, mentally or emotionally' (Etuk 2002). This makes good health to be the desire and matters of concern to everybody in Nigeria. It is to be noted that this traditional health care services are holistic in nature in the sense that it involves forces in both physical and spiritual realms. This therefore makes it to be complex. The failure of many people, especially the scientists, to understand and appreciate the complexities of this indigenous therapy makes cooperation between the orthodox and traditional health care systems to be difficult (Neba 2011).



The personnel involved in traditional therapy include: medicine men, herbalist, traditional birth attendants, midwives, bone-setters and diviners. Combination of all these formed the agents of traditional healthcare delivery system. This traditional method of health care delivery is as old as Nigerians themselves and it has sustained them over the generations. Although it may not have developed as that of India and China, it has formed part of the people's culture within the context of African Traditional Religion. The three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, namely: Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo have different and unique names for these agents. This traditional method is the only known method of health care delivery system before the arrival of orthodox medicine that accompanied both Christianity and colonial masters to Nigeria (Ajibade 2004). Among the areas covered by this traditional healthcare include: ailment of various types, barrenness/infertility, childbirth, broken bones, etc. However, the encounter of traditional healthcare system with the orthodox ones brought about the challenge of survival to the traditional method of dealing with health challenge in Nigeria.

### **Encounter of Traditional and the Orthodox Healthcares in Nigeria**

The encounter of orthodox healthcare with the traditional healthcare system in Nigeria has brought many factors into play. The arrival of the orthodox healthcare services that accompanied colonial masters into the Nigerians communities brought various derogatory terms and aspersions on the indigenous therapy. The orthodox medical practitioners, in collaboration with the early Christian missionaries, tried all they could to suppress and destroy indigenous healthcare system. Chavunduka (2020), in his article attests to the allegation that the indigenous medicine was regarded as unscientific and therefore considered anti-Christian. In the same vein, indigenous health workers were regarded as heathens because they practise African religion. Sequel to this, the new converts into Christianity were discouraged from consulting traditional healers (Olomola 2002).

Another accusation against this indigenous health care system is that the practitioners are illiterate people. The claim was that illiteracy will limit their ability to carry out many functions such as record keeping and recording of certain experience encountered in the previous treatment of patients which should serve as a point of reference.

Others include lack of knowledge in technological knowledge and inability to handle technological equipment needed for successful and adequate treatment of patients. Also, there was a claim that both the medicine and treatment centres are in unhygienic condition. Again, the practitioners were accused of boasting and claiming more above what they could do (Komolafe 1997).

Last but not the least, traditional health workers were accused of producing medicine that do not have measurement and that the medicine do not pass through scientific verification before presenting it for public consumption (Mustapha 1998). The case of Abalaka in kogi state of Nigeria is a case study. Government sealed up his clinic for the same reason (Akindutire 2003). These and many other allegations are levied against indigenous health care delivery system in Nigeria with the aim of suppressing it.

African tradition, just like any other cultural phenomenon is susceptible to suppression with adaption or extinction. The former may be said to have been the fate of traditional health care in Nigeria. In the word of Bolaji Idowu:



It is certain that a people whose culture has come into contact with another culture from outside can never really be the same again. The culture either enriched in accordance with its power to withstand the assault of other cultures while assimilating something of their best qualities or impoverished because of its weakness in consequence of which it succumbs to them by losing its own genius (Idowu 1982, 13).

The above quoted passage clearly shows the condition of traditional health services in the post-colonial and the contemporary Nigerian society. With all these allegations, many Nigerians still believe that traditional healing system cannot be thrown away just like that because of the arrival of the orthodox medicine; since its importance cannot be replaced with another thing.

### **Traditional Healthcare Delivery in the Contemporary Nigerian Society**

In the contemporary Nigerian society, the traditional health care delivery system is very much alive. It exists alongside orthodox healthcare delivery system. All attempts to suppress this traditional measure by foreign religions, colonial mentality and orthodox health care workers proved abortive. Having survived this general onslaught, traditions health sector continues growing due to series of success recorded in curing a large number of illness and other health challenges. The point we are making here is that if after many years of introducing orthodox health care system into the Nigerian health sector and the traditional health care system has not been submerged, then there is a need for a thorough evaluation of this indigenous therapy. With this evaluation, the paper will focus on the contributions and relevance of three major areas of specialization in traditional health care delivery system in Nigeria. These are Traditional Birth Attendance (TBA), Bone setters and healers.

### **Traditional Birth Attendance (TBA)**

The Traditional Birth Attendant is one of the major agents of the traditional health care delivery system in Nigeria. Members of this agent provide antenatal and delivery services to pregnant women in their communities (Ajibade 2004). They keep attending to the pregnant woman right from the period of conception through delivery to postpartum (Nwokocha 2008). This made them to be very important personalities in the health sector. The TBA is known by various names in some localities. For instance, it is known as *Agbèbí* among the Yoruba. The importance of their roles before the emergence of the orthodox healthcare system in the contemporary Nigeria society cannot be over emphasised as it is the only known agent of safe delivery then, especially in rural areas. Their major work is to assist the expectant mothers in child labour and ensure their safe delivery. This is what they have been doing successfully from the time immemorial. They have therefore contributed immensely to the development of health sector, especially in the areas of safe delivery and motherhood. It is in recognition of these roles that prompted the world health organisation (WHO) to approve the training of people as TBA and use them as bridge between the pregnant women and the modern health care delivery (WHO 1992). Many Nigerians, such as Oyeneye, had attested to the relevance of TBA in the contemporary Nigerian society. In his observation he said inter alia:



In spite of the introduction of western type of medical care, traditional medicine has continued to play a prominent role in the healthcare delivery system of the country... A large proportion of delivery is managed by traditional birth attendants outside the hospital system (Oyeneye 1984, 64).

From the above discussion, one can say unequivocally that TBA is still very much with us and it still attends to various health challenges of pregnant women for safe delivery in the contemporary Nigerian society.

### **Bone Setter**

Bone setters are another agent of the traditional health care delivery system. They are indigenous practitioners who specialised in the healing of bones and fractures of various degrees (Adewunmi 2006). In the same vein, Mustapha (1998) described bone setters as traditional medical practitioners skilled in the art of treating fractures and broken bones. Each Nigerian community has its own indigenous bone setters and they are known by various names. For instance, among the Yoruba people in Nigeria, bone setters is known as *ato eegun*. Sequel to the incessant rate of vehicular and motor cycle accidents in our society today, majority of the victims of such accidents are suffering from one form of fracture or the other. Apart from this, there are others suffering from bone fracture because of occupational and domestic accidents. Majority of the patients of bone fractures with severe cases in hospitals are, in most of the time, recommended for amputation. It is therefore the failure of the orthodox orthopaedic to handle severe cases of bone fracture without resulting to amputation that makes the services of traditional bone setter desirable. Many legs and hands that would have been amputated are today still been useful and working for their owners due to the intervention of traditional bone setters. The word of Ogunbodede cited by Ogunleye (2006), attests to the relevance of traditional healthcare delivery in the contemporary Nigerian society. He says inter alia:

Despite the scepticism and criticisms of orthodox medical and dental practitioners, traditional healers are still been actively patronised... Their effectiveness and prowess have been particularly recognised in the area of bone setting (Ogunbodede 2000, 313),

The wider acceptability that bone setters enjoy in Nigeria today makes them an important agent in the traditional healthcare delivery system. With reference to the wider acceptability, Elujoba also has this to say: 'Over 70% of Nigerians use traditional medicine. It is accessible and it is the first port of call before any emergency is transferred to the hospital' (Elujoba 2006).

### **Herbalist**

An herbalist is a traditional medical practitioner who uses herbs to treat diseases and sickness of various types. As the name implies, an herbalist manly uses plants whose leaves, roots and back are recognised to possess medicinal properties (Olanisebe 2005). It is believed that medicine produced by herbalist is both curative and preventive in nature because of their working knowledge of various plants and leaves with their curative and preventive properties (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979). It is interesting to know that the potency and effectiveness of



herbal medicine is still recognized in developing countries like Nigeria as the lives of many who could have been terminated prematurely had been preserved by this traditional health system. Generally, an herbalist symbolises the hope of society for good health especially in rural areas where orthodox health care is not adequate. This is the major reason why every ethnic group in pre-modern Nigeria has herbalists within her reach before the emergence of orthodox medicine in contemporary Nigerian society.

However, this indigenous medical care and its agents had suffered a lot from the western writers, orthodox medical personnel and general speakers who often use derogatory terms to describe them as 'satanic,' 'witch doctor', bare footed doctors, etc. The major role of this herbalist is to ensure the well been of the entire community. They handle cases such as headache, malaria and other natural diseases.

### **Relevance of Traditional Healthcare Delivery System to the Contemporary Nigerian Society**

Despite the numerous aspersions and allegations levelled against traditional health care, various researches and observation have shown that traditional therapy is indispensable if truly we want to attain the Nigeria of our dream; where everybody will have access to adequate health care delivery services. The point of interest here is that almost all of the allegations against traditional therapy are not correct. For instance, the claim that the traditional personnel are illiterate persons, lacked knowledge of pathology, produce medicine under unhygienic conditions and that their medicine do not have precise dosage could no longer hold water as some of the practitioners are literate and professional orthodox doctors. Examples of this are: Prof. Elujoba, Faculty of Pharmacy, OAU. Ile- Ife, Dr. Akintunde Ayeni, popularly known as Yemkem. This man has a befitting herbal clinic with modern laboratory at Egbeda where his herbal products are been tested (Saturday Tribune, 2005). Others include Dr. Ojeih of medical foundation, Lagos, Dr. Chinyere Ogbonna of Igbo health care services Lagos and the host of others (Ogunleye 2006).

Likewise, the claim by Igenozza (1988), that traditional health care is fetish, sacrifice and satanic is out of point as no sacrifice or ritual is needed before you can be attended to. You only need to go to their clinic and buy their finished products that were recommended with their given names, functions and dosage. In fact, majority of the finished products of traditional health care services are now receiving registration numbers and the approved stamp from the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). This no doubt, made it to be acceptable anywhere in the world.

Again, inadequate orthodox medical care and its personnel still make traditional therapy to be relevant to the contemporary Nigerian Society. It is interesting to note that traditional health care system is generating public interest in recent years especially among the developing countries. The reason behind this is that majority of these countries could not afford adequate orthodox health care for all their citizens. In Nigeria for instance, about 70% of the population do not have access to the western medical care as they live in rural areas, while the few orthodox medical personnel are practising in urban centres such as: Abuja, Lagos, Ibadan among others (Mustapha 1998). This inadequate and uneven distribution of modern health workers between rural and urban dwellers has left no alternative for the rural dwellers than the traditional healthcare system as the only means of been in good health. This inability on the part of government to adequately provide for the health care need of its people has



made traditional healing a popular culture in Nigeria (Oguntola-Laguda 2015). This therefore accounts for the numerous traditional medical centres in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the recognition and approval given to the traditional health care system by the World Health Organisation (WHO) further boost its relevance to the health care services in Nigeria. Series of programmes have been inaugurated by the WHO for the promotion and development of traditional medicine. In fact, the Alma Ata declaration of 1978 gives room for the accommodation of proven traditional remedies in the national drug policies and regulatory measure (Mustapha 1998). This clearly shows that WHO recognises the importance of traditional therapy in the health sector. In the same vein, the role of traditional birth attendants in maternal and child health, the herbalists and bone setters as health educators in their various environments are well recognised.

Moreover, there has been aggressive research on traditional medicine all over Africa. The research is mainly on African medicinal plants in various African countries. Apart from this, there are various regional centres that are coordinating the research activities. For instance, there is a centre in Cairo which is coordinating for North Africa; there is another one in Dakar and Ile – Ife which is coordinating for the West Africa. Others include the centres in Brazzaville, Kampala and Tananarive (Mustapha 1998). In addition to all these, traditional health care methods have been included in the medical school's syllabus. This gives an opportunity to the medical students to know more about their indigenous healthcare system.

Also, the position of Berman & Snyder (2004) that spirituality and one's health have a great bond of attractions, has lend credence to the relevance of traditional healthcare in Nigeria. Nigerian culture is the type that accommodates the belief in the super sensible world. Thus, in a situation where health challenges defy modern medicine; traditional health care is always the last resort. In their contributions, they were of the opinion that the basis upon which care is given to the sick ones by the healthcare practitioners, especially nurses, is the principle of holism which recognises that individuals are made of the body, soul, spirit and mind. They therefore concluded that there must be a strike of balance between one's health and spirituality; which involves tradition and other elements of man before an adequate and complete healthcare can be offered to any patients in nurse's care. In view of this, the executive governor of Oyo State in Nigeria, Seyi Makinde, has called for the exploration of the home-grown solution to the coronal virus pandemic (Feyisipo 2020). Not only this, the Federal government of Nigeria is also considering the use of traditional medicine in seeking a treatment for COVID-19 (*Opera News* 2020). This idea was expressed by the Nigerian minister for education, Osagie Ehanire, while addressing a press briefing of the presidential task force on COVID-19 in Lagos. It is interesting to note that while Nigerian government is still contemplating on the use of traditional medicine, Madagascar, a sister country in Africa emerged as the first country in the world to have the breakthrough in combating COVID-19 pandemic with the home-grown solution (Razanamparany, 2020). Consequently, countries such as: Tanzania, Cosmos, and others are now opting for the Madagascar's 'virus cure' (Shaban 2020).

Another fact that made traditional healthcare services relevant to the current Nigerian situation is its affordability and accessibility. In the contemporary Nigerian society, traditional health care service is cheaper than the orthodox ones. Modern medicine and drugs are getting more expensive daily as they are been purchase at exorbitant prices from the foreign companies that have spent large amount of money on advertising them. Contrary to



this, traditional medicine is cheap, affordable and accessible to the people in the country. In view of this, Dr. Olaosebikan Adelabu, while granting interview on ‘why Nigeria should not import malaria drugs,’ said that the country has got to a level that ‘we don’t need to spend a single kobo on importation of malaria drugs.’ He therefore advised the government to look inward and encourage herbal practitioners and their products as this will go a long way in solving the problem of importation of orthodox medicine and reduce billions of naira currently being spent on drugs (Adeniyi 2006).

In addition, traditional healthcare service is witnessing tremendous patronage in recent years. This is because of the fear of ‘medical errors’ that are rampant in orthodox healthcare system. Medical errors are now regular occurrence in modern health care delivery service. Thus, patients are avoiding ‘additional cost and emotional damage’ that medical error may cause. People are therefore shifting towards traditional healthcare delivery so as to ensure their patients’ safety (Birgila & Sahim 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the status of traditional healthcare delivery system in Nigeria with reference to the various stages it had passed through. In the pre-colonial era, Traditional Healthcare delivery is the only known healthcare services. However, in the colonial and post-colonial days, traditional therapy and the practitioners were reduced to the barest minimum with various derogatory terms such as: witch doctors, bare footed doctors, etc. In this contemporary Nigeria society, good health still remains the desire of everybody but the orthodox health care delivery system provided by the government at various levels is not adequate as the people in rural areas could not enjoy the facilities. The paper therefore is a call to both the government and the entire Nigerian populace to come to a better understanding that traditional healthcare delivery system is not against orthodox health services but complementary to it. Also, that traditional health service is still relevant to the contemporary Nigerian society as it is the only readily available means of staying in good health for rural dwellers. Again, Nigerian culture is a type that accommodates belief in the super-sensible world; this therefore accounts for the reason why some sicknesses or diseases that defy scientific explanations and treatments were often recommended for the traditional therapy as the last resort.

Based on what has been discussed above, the paper therefore recommends that government at all levels, orthodox medical practitioners and Nigerian citizens should embrace and support traditional healthcare services as it has been recognised by the WHO. Also, effort should be made to integrate this home-grown healthcare system into the modern healthcare services in Nigeria so as to address the cases of sicknesses that are now defying orthodox medications.



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